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Stress and Religious Coping among Flood Victims

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between stress and coping in a sample of 150 survivors of flood victims. Questionnaire used in this study were Disaster Stress and Coping Skill Inventory. The study also adopted an exploratory qualitative approach where a number of five respondents were interviewed. The result showed that there was a significant relationship between stress and coping, and no significant gender differences in stress and coping among the respondents. The result also showed that the respondents suffered stress and needed strong coping skills. Religion was found to be the most apparent coping skill among the victims. The implication of this study suggests strong religious and social support from people who are knowledgeable and skills in the stress management and religious coping to the flood victims

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1. Introduction

Flood has become common features in the lives of a significant number of Malaysians, as it is one of the country's major disasters. The geographic location and the climate characteristics of Malaysia have accounted about 90% of the natural disasters related. As in many other places, flood in Malaysia has contributed to high level of stress and other negative psychological problems. There were evidences reporting that flood victims experienced hurt and pain and physical problems (Victoria, Holly & Dominic (2010) and Y Badiah et al. (2008). Fear, anxiety, sensitivity and anger are some of the common reactions of the victims (Vernberg, 1999). Furthermore, several psychological sequels have been consistently found following exposure to natural disaster events such as flood.

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The most common psychological symptoms following flood trauma include feelings of guilt, depression, anxiety and the constellation of problems that constitute the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder. Flood victims also experienced major depression, substance abuse, generalized anxiety disorder and adjustment disorder. Some disaster victims experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as depression and anxieties (Vernberg, 1999). Other problems experienced by them are sadness, helplessness and hopelessness. According to Norris (2005) the effects of natural disaster are depression, anxieties, unspecific distress, cognitive distortion, panic and various health problems.

However, the effects of stress and coping skills on the victims differ from an individual to other individuals based on age group, gender and place they live. For example, in terms of gender, according to Davidson (2001, 2004) women were two times (10-14% PTSD) more likely to develop PTSD than men (5-6% PTSD).

2. Method

Participants

The first stage was a survey where adult residents (N=150) of a Sepang community that experienced and faced flood in their area in 2012 completed a set of questionnaire a year after the flood. The Malay versions of Disaster Stress and Coping Skill Inventory were combined into a single questionnaire booklet. The questionnaire was kept as brief as possible to encourage appropriate participants' responses. Refinements were made whereby English statements were translated to Malay until an acceptable questionnaire was developed during the translation process. A final set of translation were measures into English and confirmed its adequacy of the final Malay instruments.

The second stage of the research involved conducting an open-ended interview. An exploratory study using qualitative approach was also conducted where five respondents were interviewed. During the interview session the victims were asked to share their experiences during the flood and recall everything that they had gone through and they had seen happening to them. They were also interviewed what they have seen around them.

Result

A study was conducted by the authors using t-test analysis to determine whether there were significant differences of gender in disaster stress. The finding showed that there was no significant differences in disaster stress between male and female respondents ($t=0.729$, $p>.05$) and coping skills ($t=0.856$, $p>.05$). The finding also showed that there was a significant relationship between disaster stress and coping skill ($r=-0.29$, $p<.05$) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between disaster stress and coping skill

	Disaster Stress	Coping Skill
Disaster Stress (DS)		-0.29**
Coping Skill (CS)	-0.29**	
P < .05		

Discussion

This finding supported a study conducted by Hooper (2003) that found no gender differences in disaster stress (Hooper, 2003). However, Olff et. Al (2007) found that women are more likely than men to perceive a situation as threatening, rate events as significantly more stressful, and endorse more loss of personal control. Additionally, women are more likely than men to experience acute psychological and biological responses to trauma including intense fear, avoidance, intrusive thoughts, horror, helplessness, panic, and anxiety (Olff et al., 2007).

The finding also showed that there was a significant relationship between disaster stress and coping skill. The findings of this study is similar to those obtained by George et al. (2002) and Pergament, Mahoney and Stein (2008) which demonstrated that integrating religion and spirituality have often associated with decrease of stress level. Bergin (1984) reviewed research studies through the 1980s and found that when religion was correlated with measures of mental health.

Religious coping is also correlated with a number of positive outcomes, including better physical health (Harris et al, 1995), decreased levels of depression (Bjorck and Thurman (2007); Koenig et al. (2001), increased mental health status (Pargament et al. 1995) and stress related growth. Pargament et al. (1995) noted that religious coping has also been associated with better health and mental health outcomes in a wide variety of life situations including illness, victimization, war, and the death of a loved one.

The results showed some themes related to stress and coping. There was a feeling of stress experienced by the flood victims. For example, one respondent said “*Everything seemed to be in chaos. Life would never be the same again. I have never been this stressful*”. In terms of the mental health status of the victim, emotional reaction towards stress is very significant in contributing towards stress and sleep disturbance. One respondent expressed his disability to sleep “*I had sleepless nights for days*”. Sadness was also seen as common among the victims in this study. Loss of objects and properties which have sentimental values and are irreplaceable became the cause of their stress and sadness. All respondents reported that religious beliefs helped them to cope with flood disaster. This is in line with psychological theories of religious coping that people tend to cope with adverse life events by (1) turning to their religion for relief and strength (2) engaging in religious activities and searching for a reason for the event, for instance that the event was an act of God.

Despite having gone through all the hardships during the flood, most of the respondents practiced effective coping skills. Religion was found to be the most apparent coping skill among the victims. This finding was expected as religious coping is paramount in managing disaster stress. For example, Pargament et.al (1998, Tait and Silver (1989) Gartner, Larson and Allen (1997) are in the same opinions to that. Pargament et al. (1998) proposed that positive religious coping can include strategies such as benevolent religious reappraisals, collaborative religious coping, seeking spiritual support, spiritual connection, religious purification, and religious focus. In contrast, negative religious coping can include expressing spiritual discontent, reappraising a situation as being due to God’s punishment or demonic forces, verbalizing interpersonal religious discontent, or reappraising or questioning God’s power.

Conclusion

Flood is common in Malaysia due to its geographic location and the climate characteristic of the country. Flood has contributed to high level of stress and other negative psychological problems in individuals. The effects on flood victims differ from an individual to other individuals based on age group, gender, and place they live. A study conducted by the researcher found that there were no significant differences in disaster stress and coping skills between male and female respondents and a significant relationship between disaster stress and coping skill. Religious coping is found to be the most frequent coping skills among the victims.

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